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Representations of the Islamic Communities in Italy 2001-2011*

Abstract

In the wake of Oriana Fallaci's highly tendentious but widely circulated , representation of the relationship between the West and the Islamic world, a growing number of texts have been published which seek to provide more knowledge about the working of the Islamic community in Italy and about Islam in general. The article examines the different forms that writing of this kind has assumed and the issues that it has addressed. It looks at the ways in which various writers have sought to represent the changing physical and cultural landscape of Italy, at how they have written on the relationship of women to Islam, and on the extent of the activity of radical Islam in Italy. The article concludes by looking at how writers talk about Islam as an internal actor in Italian society and culture not only in the present but over a much more extended period of time.

Key words Islam, identity, perception, religion, tradition

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It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that Italy's relationship with Islam, and by extension with the Islamic world, represents one of the most important cultural and societal questions currently facing the country. If it is true that, over a lengthy period of time, the presence of Italy's growing Islamic community was not something that was generally visible and therefore raised little attention in the national media, the same cannot be said about the present and about the comparatively recent past.

Originating from the migratory flows from a differentiated range of countries over the last decades, Italy's growing Muslim population, by most estimates, now numbers around 1.3 million and its presence is evident at every level within Italian society.[1] The increasing evidence of Islam as Italy's second religion, as is probably only to be expected, has generated a polarized and often deeply acrimonious debate that, with varying degrees of intensity, has involved all the cultural, political and religious institutions of the country. The nature of the debate that surrounds the issue of the growing importance of Islam as an internal actor within Italian society demonstrates, in the view of some influential commentators, that a great deal of work needs to be done to encourage greater awareness of the dynamics of successful inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, while others have argued that a pervasive sense of crisis, or even of conflict, does at least serve the function of bringing matters of considerable moment into public consciousness.[2] If, owing to the forces of globalization, Italy is changing rapidly, then it is perhaps inevitable that the effects of this process are registered at every level of society. What is certain is that Islam, as the sociologist Renzo Guolo has written, asks extremely searching questions of Italian society, of its identity, of its internal coherence, and of its likely future development (2007: v). One might add that any change to the sense of what constitutes the reality of the present brings with it a corresponding, but not necessarily obvious, alteration to the way in which the past of the country is considered.

In the debate concerning the position of Islam within Italian society, many groups and individuals have been prepared to express views that are characterized by a high degree of insularity or intransigence. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the alarmist comments of the then Bishop of Bologna, Giacomo Biffi, caused a great deal of comment,[3] while the hostility that the late priest and political activist, Gianni Baget Bozzo , expressed towards Islam was similarly effective in attracting a large degree of publicity.[4] Within the secular world, highly regarded figures like the eminent political scientist, Giovanni Sartori have expressed (2000) a pessimistic attitude towards

multiculturalism. In contemporary politics, the Northern League has established itself as the principal exponent of anti-Islamic sentiment.

Clearly, the events of 11 September 2001 gave a particular impetus to the current of anti-Islamic feeling; a current that was expressed most prominently in the books which Oriana Fallaci published between 2001 and 2004, *La rabbia e l'orgoglio* [The Rage and the Pride], *La forza della ragione* [The Force of Reason] *Oriana Fallaci intervista Oriana Fallaci* [Oriana Fallaci interviews Oriana Fallaci].[5] The success of all these works meant that a highly tendentious interpretation of Islam and the Islamic world achieved very wide dissemination among the Italian public.[6] According to the vision set out by the 'trilogy', Islam – as a religion and as a civilization – represents an unmoving body of thought and belief which structures human identity in such a way that it is relentlessly hostile to the West: what the trilogy does, in other words, is to argue that fundamentalism is not a separate reality, divorced from the central current of Islam, but the expression of the inner form of the Muslim world. Fallaci's work does not simply maintain, to use Huntington's concept (1997), that there is a 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and the West: her assertion is rather that it is the aim of the Islamic world to undermine and colonize Western societies by changing their demographics and by undermining their systems of value. The thesis that is advanced in the trilogy is one in which the events of 9/11, though unique in their horror, must be seen as an occurrence within an infinitely greater historical process; a process which Fallaci sees as leading ultimately to the dissolution of Western identity.

The importance of the debate surrounding Italy's changing demographic, cultural and religious reality, coupled with the need to combat a widely disseminated negative stereotype of the Muslim world has encouraged a growth in the number of texts that have sought to provide more knowledge about the working of the Islamic community in Italy and about Islam in general. Within the Muslim community itself, a number of figures have written extensively on their personal experiences. Sergio Yahya Pallavicini, the imam of the al-Wahid mosque in Milan, has written on

Islam within Europe from the perspective of an Italian imam and has, in his text of 2007, *Dentro la moschea* [Inside the Mosque], sought to demystify elements of Muslim worship and social thinking. Similarly, the Iraqi-born writer and academic, Younis Tawfik, has written an introductory text on Islam (2002) that seeks to explain, for a public lacking accurate information on the subject, some of the basic features of the nature and development of Islam, while in his works of fiction he addresses the range of ambivalent perceptions of the Muslim community in Italy.[7]

Both Pallavicini and Tawfik have acted as members of the Consulta per l'Islam italiano (see below) as has Souad Sbai. The head of the Associazione della Comunità Marocchina delle Donne in Italia [Association of Women of the Moroccan Community in Italy] and a member of the Italian parliament for the Popolo della Libertà [People of Freedom] party, Sbai has, over the last decade, devoted herself to combating Islamic extremism and defending the rights of Muslim women in Italy.[8] In her work of 2010, *L'Inganno: vittime del multiculturalismo* [The Deception: Victims of Multiculturalism], she examines the development of radical Islam and what are, in her view, the problems of multiculturalism when it is confronted with extremism. Though her work looks at the European situation as a whole, it concludes with an examination of the position of Muslim women in Italy and an account of the work that Sbai has accomplished in the Italian parliament. In her most recent work, *Il sogno infranto* [The Broken Dream] (2012), she looks at the consequences of the Arab Spring and explores the potential development of extremism.

Within the academic community, the Algerian-born sociologist Khaled Fouad Allam, has written a number of works on the Islamic world (2001, 2004) and on Islam within Italy. His most recent, and probably most well known text, has the significant title, *L'Islam spiegato ai Leghisti* [Islam explained to the Supporters of the League] (2011).[9] The book seeks to examine the thinking of the Lega Nord (the political party, the Northern League) on Islam and on migration, it discusses the different facets of Islamophobia, it explores the wider context of Islam's relation with the West and it looks at the growing evidence of Islam in Italy. Other prominent voices on the subject of Italy and

Islam are those of Renzo Guolo and Stefano Allievi. Among his many contributions to the subject, Guolo has written, in *Xenofobi e xenofili: gli italiani e l'Islam* [Xenophobes and xenophiles: Italians and Islam] (2003), on the attitudes of Italians to Islam and, more recently (2011), on the contrasting views of the Church and the Lega Nord regarding religious diversity.[10] Allievi has written a series of texts aimed at deconstructing the false dichotomy between the Islamic world and the West (2007), and at placing the implications of Fallaci's arguments in clearer perspective (2006), but he has also experimented with other types of writing, perhaps most notably in his work of 2003, *Islam italiano* [Italian Islam], which is structured as a travelogue that explores 'il mondo dell'Islam che ci sta intorno' [The Islamic world that surrounds us] (p. xvi).[11] Though he refers to established literary precedents, he is quite clear that his journey is a kind of antithesis to the grand tour; rather than visiting famous places, he concentrates on the spaces of the everyday, he witnesses examples of material poverty and he observes the, often difficult, process of integration. Though he focuses on the present, he delves frequently into the past and attempts to predict the likely evolution of the social processes that he sees.

Working from a different disciplinary background, another figure who has made a series of authoritative interventions in the debate on Italy's relationship with Islam is the historian, Franco Cardini.[12] Both in his historical inquiries and in his essay writing, Cardini has cast new light on the present by examining Italy's relationship with Islam and the Islamic world in a wider historical perspective. In works such as *Noi e l'Islam: un incontro possibile?* [Islam and Us: a Possible Encounter] (2001), *I cantori della guerra giusta* [The Advocates of a Just War] (2002) or *La paura e l'arroganza* [Fear and Arrogance] (2003) he explores the complex of ideas and imaginings that lie behind the West's concept of Islam and the ways in which they exert themselves in contemporary thinking and practice. In attempting to expose some of the over-simplifications which are habitually relied upon in discussions regarding Islam and in pointing to the dangers that are inherent in not examining some of our most deep-laid prejudices, Cardini's work inevitably reflects on the meaning

of identity and the purpose that it serves within modern polities. In the course of his examination of Europe's encounters with Islam over hundreds of years, he explores the complex of interests and privileges on which a notion of the identity, or self-image, of the West is based and he discusses the consequences of the accelerated processes of globalization.

All the texts to which I have so far referred are engaged in the endeavour to present a firmly grounded and informed picture of the Islamic community in Italy rather than a fearful projection of an imaginary Islam; they are all texts which attempt to alter fairly entrenched ways of seeing social and cultural phenomena; and they are all texts that are intended to allow their readers to sense the profundity and multi-faceted nature of the question of integration. Though all of these texts are discursive rather than fictional, they do not simply deliver information. In seeking to address such complex issues as perception, otherness and identity – and in seeking, therefore, to play a role in a societal debate of self-evident importance – their success depends on their ability to excite comment and analysis. The philosophical assumptions on which they are based, the models of culture and humanity that they propose, the inter-connections between the visions that they offer are all issues that invite further investigation.

The purpose, broadly speaking, of what follows is to examine the picture of Islam and the Islamic community in Italy that emerges from the texts that I have referred to. It is to look at the implications of the different perspectives in which that world is seen. The sheer range of the writings in question is such that it would require a book-length study to draw out and comment on the significance of all the issues that they confront. My intention is, therefore, simply to concentrate on a selection of some of the most complex questions that are explored, and what I have to say divides roughly into three parts. I want firstly to examine some of the ways in which various writers have sought to represent the changing physical and cultural landscape of Italy as well as the debates that have surrounded the building of sites of Islamic worship in a number of Italian cities. I want then to explore how different figures have sought to confront some of the most controversial issues that

frequently determine the nature of media comment on the Muslim community in Italy, issues such as the wearing of the veil or the extent of the activity of radical Islam. As I have suggested, one of the most interesting features of the texts under consideration is that they are concerned with the notion of what constitutes Italian identity, and I wish to conclude by looking at how different writers talk about Islam as an internal actor in Italian society and culture not only in the present but over a much more extended period of time.

Within the corpus of texts that I have isolated the major theme is the change to the cultural and physical landscape of Italy that is currently under way and that theme is addressed most directly by Allievi's book, *Islam italiano*. In the opening pages of this work, the author states that it is the appearance of the mosque in both large and small urban centres that is the most visible sign of Italy's changing reality as well as the site on which much controversy is focussed.[13] In the course of his narrated journey, he moves from Sicily to Sardinia, then gradually up from the south west of Italy through Naples and Rome, then on to Perugia, Florence and Bologna; he then moves to the north east of the country, before passing through Liguria, Milan and Turin. In each instance, his method of inquiry is to tell the story of how a particular mosque has been constructed, to recount the life stories that are behind a given project, to reflect on its symbolic significance and to consider how individuals or groups of people interact with a surrounding environment that is in continual change.

When he is in Catania he recounts the events behind the building, as early as 1980, of the city's largest mosque. In Palermo, he discusses the process by which the city's most well-known mosque was established, with the support of the Tunisian government, on the site of the disused church of San Paolino dei Giardinieri. In Bologna, he narrates the process by which, through the work of the association USMI (Unione degli Studenti Musulmani d'Italia [Union of Muslim Students in Italy]), the sports hall of a disused school was transformed into the al-Nur mosque; while in Milan he considers the mosaic of different mosques that has developed within the city. In all these instances, the real question that he is asking is how the growing Muslim community responds to, or articulates

with, the evident signs of its presence. The story that emerges is that the community tends not simply to follow initiatives that are decided in advance, but to develop in ways that are less structured and more unpredictable. Thus, rather than making use of the purpose-built edifice, the Muslim community in Catania prefers more modest structures. Similarly in Palermo, rather than using exclusively the city's most prominent mosque, the local Muslim population relies on a network of smaller places of worship, a network that reflects the needs of different ethnic groups and which is situated, for the most part, within the suburbs of the city. What this tends to mean is that the most conspicuous figures within the Muslim community are not necessarily its most representative leaders, while a more differentiated, less politicized, picture of the community emerges from this simple type of inquiry.

Through his empirically based research into the different ways in which people inhabit the built environment, Allievi attempts to show the disjunction between the manner in which the Islamic community is frequently portrayed in the media and the ways in which it actually functions. In his own words, he wishes to insist on the difference between 'un'Islam di carta' [an abstract Islam] and 'un'Islam di carne' [an Islam of human beings] (2003: 93). Another metaphor that he uses in his writing to convey the changing nature of Italy's Muslim community is that of watching a film (rather than studying a photograph) and one of the passages that best illuminates the intricacies that underlie the establishment of the physical presence of Islam in Italy is his writing on the central mosque in Rome, the most prominent Islamic building in Italy. He begins by examining the physical attributes of the site, the time of its construction and the financial arrangements behind it originating in the early 1970s; building work started in 1984 but it was not completed until ten years after that (2003: 73-79). He then goes on to read the symbolic significance that the site has assumed for different communities at different times and in different contexts.

The mosque was built before there was a sizeable Islamic community in Rome and so its original significance was largely symbolic, or as Allievi puts it, an act of 'religious diplomacy'.

However, with the development of an increasingly large migrant population, the mosque quickly, though perhaps unexpectedly, became a site of considerable sociological, as well as religious, importance. If the relationship of the mosque to the changing demographics of Rome's Muslim community is one thing, the associations that it has assumed over time for different elements within the Catholic Church is another. As the work of Renzo Guolo documents, the Italian Church is involved in a profound discussion concerning its relationship with Islam. In his view, notwithstanding Pope John Paul II's emphasis on the need for dialogue, the position at the highest levels of the episcopacy is less 'aperturista' (open to dialogue) (Guolo 2003: 81-87). Going further back in time, Allievi looks at how different currents within the Catholic Church interpreted the appearance of the central mosque in Rome. He documents how the building of the mosque was originally interpreted by some as undermining the status of Rome as the home of Catholicism. Though he concentrates on the way in which, for mainstream Catholic opinion, the mosque has more readily assumed the status as an indication of an inter-religious dialogue that was promoted, especially, in the latter years of John Paul II's papacy. What Allievi's analysis reveals is not only how a space of enormous significance can assume different meanings according to the discourse in which it is framed, but how it can anticipate developments in the society that surrounds it. Whatever the intentions were behind its original construction, the central mosque – in its contemporary reality – symbolizes, both geographically and spiritually, the legitimacy of Italy's Muslim population.

Sergio Yahya Pallavicini considers the same phenomena as Allievi but from a different perspective. His text *Dentro la moschea* follows a simple plan: in the initial section he explains the architectural design and symbolic significance of the mosque, subsequently he expands on his own interpretation of the experience of Islamic identity within an Italian context, he then reproduces the stories of Muslim men and women from different parts of the country with the intention of discussing the complexities of integration.[14] Within this framework, he describes the building of mosques in various parts of Italy from the inside, gathering together the direct testimony of those

involved. His text thus includes the description of the difficulty of setting up a mosque in Agrigento, the planning of the interior of the al-Wahid mosque in Milan, the search for a site on which to build a mosque in Naples. The text also includes stories of individual conversions to Islam, personal reflections on the relationship of women to Islam, interpretations of the religious significance of events that mark the stages of a person's life.[15] The different narratives that are collected in *Dentro la moschea* are intended to demystify the life that surrounds Italy's growing network of sites of Islamic worship and to show the everyday concerns of most Muslim men and women.

One of the most important things about the stories that Allievi and Pallavicini narrate is that they are about everyday concerns and life events. The stories that they recount indicate how religious belief functions within the lives of ordinary people, how it structures people's understanding of their relationship to others and the outside world, how it is expressed through acts of daily worship and through collective rituals. The stories that are told – either directly or through the mediation of the author – whether they concern the alteration of the built environment, the interactions of a community or even the experience of loss and mourning, offer different representations of interiority. The instances drawn from people's lives reveal the complexity of individual identity and show the distance of most Muslims from any form of political ideology.

Though writers like Allievi, Pallavicini and Fouad Allam are keen to direct attention to the everyday reality of Islamic practice and belief, they do not, of course, seek to deny the existence of radical Islam. As Allievi writes: 'Il fondamentalismo esiste. Lo si sa. Lo si sente. Capita di incontrarlo sulla propria strada. Diffonde un'atmosfera specifica, parole d'ordine, messaggi' (2003: 195) [Islamic fundamentalism exists. One knows that and one can feel that. Sometimes we encounter it along our journey. It disseminates its own particular atmosphere, its own admonishments and messages]. When he is discussing the recent history of the al-Nur mosque in Bologna's via Massarenti, he refers to the period in which it attracted a good deal of media attention owing to the contestation of the mosque's leadership by a group belonging to the-radical organization , Takfir wa al-hijra. In his

characterization of the different mosques in Milan, he speaks at length about the problems that the transitory presence of extremism has caused the Islamic centre of viale Jenner (2003: 188-95). Equally, Fouad Allam and Pallavicini refer to specific incidents of tension.

Beyond the incidents that are recorded, extremism poses more general problems for the Muslim community. To begin with, by presenting itself as the only face of Islam, it seeks to elide – what many commentators regard as an exclusively modern – political ideology with a religion.[16] Such an interpretation is shared, of course, by those who are hostile to Islam as a whole or who maintain that it is destined to remain the prisoner of its fundamentalist fringe. The propagation of what Fouad Allam sees as a 'static and pessimistic' vision tends to mean that a religious or ethnic boundary is often reinforced by what he sees as a 'boundary of fear' as every Muslim is seen as a potential fanatic (2011: 31-32). Franco Cardini, referring to the theoretical categories of Hannah Arendt's work, suggests that for many groups within the West, an abstract, discarnate image of the Muslim is manipulated as a metaphysical enemy.[17] All commentators remark on how every member of the Muslim community experiences the general demonization of Islam; an experience which has become almost intolerable in the aftermath of 9/11 and which the works of Fallaci have done a significant amount to accentuate.[18]

A major strand within the writing of all those who address the question of Islam in Italy is, inevitably, the position that radical Islam occupies within Italy's Muslim community. The conclusion to which much of Allievi's writing tends is that the majority of Muslims have no connection with Islam's radical fringe and simply want to be able to worship in peace and to transmit the religious and moral values in which they believe to their offspring (2003: 196). But he also argues that one is unlikely to understand the power of certain articulations of radical Islam unless one has some sense of their appeal which, he argues, resides in part in the vision of social justice that they offer. In order to stress this point, he draws a comparison between Islamist and extreme left groups– as Cardini does in his work (2002: 96, 168). In both he sees a messianic expectation of a new world: for the

latter the new world will be realized in a post-revolutionary future, whereas the utopia envisaged by radical Islam is an idealized vision of the past – the time of the Prophet – projected onto the future. The religious/social character of the utopian future that is envisaged by radical Islam allows it to present itself as a third way: distinct from and hostile towards Western capitalism and liberalism on the one hand and Marxism – especially in its Arab nationalist versions – on the other.

With specific reference to the Italian context, Allievi conceptualizes the relationship of extremism to the Islamic community by suggesting a comparison with the relationship that the *Brigate rosse* had to the Left as a whole. In this interpretation, the power of the *Brigate rosse* began seriously to decline when they began to be seen not as 'compagni che sbagliano' [comrades who are mistaken] but, as he puts it, as 'figli degeneri di un ideale' (2003: 196) [the corrupted offspring of an ideal] and, therefore, as inimical to – rather than supportive of – the community as a whole.

The essential point that he is making through a comparison of this kind is that extremism is a problem for the Islamic community and a marker within its development. Part of the aim of his work, in common with that of many others, is to chart the establishment of Islam as Italy's second religion. The success of that process can, to an extent, be gauged by the effectiveness with which the main body of Muslim opinion is able to distance itself from an element that impedes the growth of an Islamic presence in Italy. In the view of Pallavicini, the problem that is caused by radical Islam is accentuated by the opposition of groups within Italian society to initiatives that are designed to provide proper representation for a community which is obviously in need of cultural, judicial and linguistic orientation (2007: 46). The example that he uses to prove this point is written by Ahmad Abd al-Waliyy Gianpiero Vincenzo,[19] who recounts in detail the negotiations, beginning in 2000 behind the ambitious plan to build a mosque in the run-down suburban district of Ponticelli in Naples. Intended as a symbol of integration and inter-religious dialogue and supported by the regional council, the project was shelved, in December 2001, owing to objections raised by the Lega

Nord in the Italian parliament to the use of public funds, intended for the regeneration of Ponticelli, in an initiative of this kind.

The example of the mosque in Ponticelli is used to support Pallavicini's wider contention that the lack of an authoritative, Islamic entity (what he defines in Italian as 'un ente religioso islamico di riferimento') officially recognized and composed of Italian Muslims has impeded dialogue with the state and often meant that in the absence of such an organization, the establishment of places of worship is often left to the initiative of individuals and private associations. The texts of Pallavicini and Fouad Allam also give more factual information on the development of specific proposals aimed at distancing the Islamic community from its fundamentalist fringe. They both write, for example, on the *Manifesto contro il terrorismo e per la vita* [manifesto against Terrorism and for Life], an initiative which – as its title suggests – brought together a multiplicity of voices within the Islamic community in opposition to violence of any kind.[20] They also write in detail on the development of structures intended to encourage a sustained formal dialogue between the Islamic community and the organizations of the Italian state. Both their works trace the significance of the establishment – promoted in 2005 by the then Interior Minister Giuseppe Pisanu – of the *Consulta per l'Islam italiano* [Council for Italian Islam] which was made up of representatives from all Muslim associations and designed as a forum in which to discuss issues concerning integration. Their works also explore the subsequent state-sponsored initiative which centred on the presentation, in April 2007, of the *Carta dei valori della cittadinanza e dell'integrazione* [Charter of Values of Citizenship and Integration]. Pursued under Pisanu's successor, Giuliano Amato, the Charter set out to articulate a set of principles valid for all Italian citizens from whichever cultural, ethnic or religious background. Divided into seven sections covering all spheres of social activity,[21] its purpose was to re-affirm basic principles regarding human dignity, equality before the law, and religious freedom.[22]

The question of the existence and status of radical Islam is, of course, bound up with the issue of the relationship of women to Islam, and the work of Souad Sbai – of the texts under

discussion – offers the most powerful consideration of this subject. In her introductory remarks to *L'Inganno* (2010), she is careful to situate her observations within the context of her work as President of the Associazione della Comunità Marocchina delle Donne in Italia and to state that she regards the development of any society as dependent on its capacity to harmonize secular principles with religious traditions. In common with commentators like Allievi or Fouad Allam, she insists on the plurality of Islam and the inevitable influence that place of origin exerts on its inflection. Similarly, in opposition to a stereotype of Islamic identity frequently propagated by the media, she draws on statistical information to point to the fact that across Europe the lifestyle of most Muslims is predominantly secular.[23] Much of *L'Inganno*, however, concentrates on the consequences of extremism. Drawing predominantly on cases that she has witnessed herself, Sbai documents the extent of the violence to which women in the Muslim community are subject as a result of radical interpretations of Islam.[24] The abuse that many women suffer is, she argues, made worse by the isolated and disorientating conditions in which they frequently live and which makes them more vulnerable than they would be in their countries of origin. An important part of the argument that is made in *L'Inganno* is that the pace of change affecting the position of women is often more rapid in countries outside Europe than it is within sections of the migrant community.[25]

The anger that animates Sbai's writing is not directed exclusively at those who use extremist teaching to justify oppressive behaviour towards women, it is also directed at those who, following a particular understanding of multiculturalism, are prepared to show a certain blindness towards the private sphere of the individual in the name of the relativity of cultural norms and values. Her contention is that what she defines as a 'dogmatic' view of multiculturalism is prevalent among many sections of Italy's political class (2010: 16-18) and that it displays not only a lack of cultural preparation but an indifference to the development of groups that are hostile to the idea of integration (2010: 93).[26] Not intended simply as the exposition of a problem, her text argues that multiculturalism means very little unless it is accompanied by the promotion of human rights in both

the public and the private sphere. She argues that the various communities that form part of a society are not isolated and immutable but inevitably engaged in a process of interaction and progressive transformation. In this context, the purpose of the Italian state is not only to restrict the spaces in which extremist groups can operate but to promote greater awareness of the meaning of citizenship and to invest in initiatives that encourage participation in the collective structures of society. In her view, the degree to which all Muslim women are conscious of their rights becomes a marker for the development of Italian society as a whole (2010: 47).

If the separation between Islam and its radical fringe is essential to the argument that Sbai makes in *L'Inganno* it is central to all the other texts under consideration. In *L'Islam spiegato ai Leghisti*, for example, Fouad Allam considers how there is a tendency within media reporting to interpret incidents of domestic violence within the Islamic community not as specific and isolated events but as confirmation that violence is intrinsic to Islam and that it is, therefore, incompatible with modernity. Such an implication in turn leads to the suggestion that there is an irredeemable fracture between Islam and the West which, sooner or later, will lead to a 'clash of civilizations' (2011: 62-63).

The essential point of Allam's writing on this issue – which is echoed in different ways by all writers on the subject – is that we need to beware of making errors in perception and we need to be careful about how we frame some of the questions that we ask. Drawing autobiographically on his experience of growing up in Algeria and of living in Italy, he makes a series of other points on the problems of perception and inference (2011: 119-26). Commenting on a number of websites, sponsored by the Lega Nord, he points to the partiality of the perspective in which they see the relation of women and Islam. It is, in his view, a perspective which fails to consider or even acknowledge the existence within the Islamic world of the huge growth in associations dedicated to the pursuit of human rights.[27] Allam also suggests that some consideration of history encourages us to move away from the assumption that Islam, unlike any other religion or culture, is somehow

static or necessarily prisoner of its more reactionary inclinations. If we begin to think with greater historical consciousness, then we become aware, to begin with, that the development of women's rights in Western cultures is hardly a given. Secondly, we begin to see that *within* the histories of various Muslim countries – Allam refers in particular to Egyptian society of the 1920s – the past sometimes offers a progressive model that can be emulated.[28] The third point that is made throughout his text is that the inevitable consequence of the macro-historical process of globalization is a greater hybridization of customs, beliefs and values.

As the narration of a journey through Italy, Allievi's *Islam italiano* focuses much more on the question of the ways in which we actually see the world that surrounds us and clearly one of the issues that he confronts in his writing is the kind of associations that are made about the dress of Muslim women. Though he does not refer explicitly to the language of semiotics, he considers the veil as a sign or signifier which leads us to make a series of associations and assumptions. The principal argument of his work is that a certain degree of vigilance needs to be used over the way in which we attribute meaning to the signs that we see. He substantiates this point by referring to the way in which the media is often guilty of seeking out representatives of the Islamic community who conform to a certain stereotype, or as he says, perform the role of the representatives of Islam 'as we imagine them to be or as we would like them to be' (2003: 253-257). The tendency to make arbitrary associations is accompanied, he argues, by the frequent failure on the part of the media to make appropriate distinctions between types of Muslim dress; inaccurately defining, for example, the *hijab* or headscarf as a *chador* or assuming that any form of overtly Muslim style of dress is necessarily a declaration of a radicalized identity. His argument is that a way of seeing that is more readily able to make distinctions is likely to be more sensitive to the range of motivations that lie behind adherence to Islamic styles of dress. Cardini, in his work, suggests that we should look more closely at the emotions that underlie the identifications that we habitually make and asks whether an immediate opposition to the visible signs of religious observance does not reveal an uncertainty

about one's own identity (2002: 108). So far as wearing the veil is not a matter of compulsion, Allievi similarly argues that it should become 'sociologically uninteresting' and cease to be a problem 'for us'.[29]

A large part of the interest of the texts to which I have referred is to be found in the way in which they suggest how we might avoid the restrictions of one interpretative scheme or another. They all point to the ease with which it is possible to make over-simplifications which distort our understanding of social and cultural realities. They all discuss how certain media reporting encourages us to believe that Islam is solidly uniform rather than a plurality of forms of religious observance. They all insist on the dangers of failing to make a distinction between radical Islam – which should be seen more appropriately as a political ideology – and Islam itself. But, most importantly, they alert their reader to the necessity of examining the assumptions that lie behind common Western perceptions of Islam. They enjoin their reader to think about the unconscious imaginative and emotive processes that are at play in the construction of an idea of Islam as necessarily inimical to the West and they draw attention to some of the paradoxes that occur when the notion of a Christian West is opposed to that of a Muslim East.[30] Franco Cardini observes that: 'un cristiano "occidentale" se è un cristiano sul serio, non può non sentirsi più vicino a un ebreo e a un musulmano di quanto non si senta a un "occidentale" agnostico' (2002: 74-75) [A 'Western' Christian, if he or she really is a Christian, cannot fail to feel closer to an adherent to Judaism or to a Muslim than to a 'Western' agnostic].

One of the ways in which the various writings attempt to see the present in a new perspective is to re-examine the past or at least to call into question some of the assertions that are often made about the history of Europe's relation with the Islamic world, and Cardini is perhaps the figure who has engaged most consistently with the issue of how a notion of historical precedent weighs upon the present. Motivating many of his writings is the proposition that if we are to live in a world in which a fearful image of the development of Islam has been very effectively disseminated,

then we should at least examine the basis of this view, the notion of self and other on which it is based, the underlying narrative structure on which it depends. It is precisely in this context that he aims to deconstruct Samuel Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations (2002: 99-100). Cardini points to the deterministic logic that underlies the theory, claiming that any prediction of the future based on a selective analogy with the past is highly questionable and arguing that the thought of Huntington and that of bin Laden are mutually sustaining (2002: 179-80). But above all, he attacks what he regards as the 'grotesque fragility' of the argument that the relationship between Europe and Islam has been defined by fourteen centuries of tension and conflict.

Not only in works like *I cantori della guerra giusta* or *Noi e l'Islam* but in more conventionally historical works such as *Europa e Islam: storia di un malinteso* [Europe and Islam: the History of a Misunderstanding], he argues that there has been no centuries-long clash between Christianity and Islam. Even going back to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, he regards the incidents of military conflict as epiphenomena within a continuous economic, commercial and cultural relationship.[31] As well as deconstructing the series of tropes on which the clash of civilizations theory is based and as well as charting, in considerable empirical detail, Europe's interaction over centuries with the Islamic world, Cardini's works pose the philosophical question of whether we can really define another religion and/or culture as *other*. He argues that it does not make any historical sense to talk about Islam as a stranger to, or as an intruder in, Europe, and he asks whether one can define as *foreign* a culture that has, in the past, dominated parts of Europe; which has communicated to us some of the most basic elements of our knowledge and which has been Europe's economic and trading partner for centuries.

The view that Islam is part of Western identity that Cardini's works explore both historically and philosophically is present within the writing of other figures, though in their work it is articulated slightly differently. One of the most significant features of the travelogue is that it allows its writer to explore the history of the sites that he or she visits; the travel writer, in the evocative language of Paul Fussell (1990), moves through time as well as through space. In journeying from one part of Italy to

another, Allievi is often struck by the physical evidence that Islam has been an internal actor in Italian society over centuries. He finds that the architectural and symbolic evidence of an earlier Islamic presence in parts of Italy is often astounding, whether that is of the period of Islamic rule in Sicily in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the emirate of Bari in the ninth century, the Islamic colony in Lucera in the thirteenth century or the evidence throughout Sardinia and the South of Italy of Saracen incursions – the fear of which is, as Allievi notes, evident even toponymically with place names such as Torre Annunziata, Torre del Greco, Monte Saraceno and Punta Saracena throughout the South of Italy (2003: 48-49).[32]

Similarly, when Fouad Allam makes a journey to Palermo he discovers the extent to which the fabric of the city has been imprinted by its Islamic past. The experience of being confronted with the physical signs of an Islamic presence within Italy that dates back hundreds of years encourages a number of reflections. Firstly, the architectural evidence reveals the existence of a memory which, though subject – Allam maintains – to a process of repression, can be recovered and integrated into an everyday consciousness of a national past. Secondly, the evidence of the extent of Sicily's Muslim heritage – whether that is in Palermo, Mazara del Vallo or elsewhere – acts as an obvious counterpoint to those arguments which posit cultural identity as something which is essentially stable and homogeneous, and which has been undermined only relatively recently by the forces of globalization. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly of all, a recovered awareness of the complexity of the past encourages greater flexibility and creativity in addressing the challenges that are posed in the world of contemporary reality. Going as far back as the twelfth century and the reign of Frederick II, Allam argues – in common with Sbai (2010: 150-52) – that in its cultural and religious diversity the Sicily of that time provides a model which can inform the present. In his words: 'Lì il meticciato fu realtà e non mera utopia; fu il prodotto della tolleranza fra le diverse religioni, un luogo in cui tutte le religioni rivelate ebbero implicitamente un loro statuto' (2011: 154) [There, hybridity was a reality and not merely a utopia; it was the result of the tolerance that existed between the different religions, a place in which all the revealed religions had implicitly their own laws].

In his work *Xenofobi e xenofili*, Renzo Guolo poses the question: 'Quale Islam hanno di fronte oggi gli italiani? E che immagine dell'islam si è formata nel loro immaginario collettivo?' (2003: 3) [What is the Islam with which Italians are in contact today? And what image of Islam has been formed in their collective imaginary?] The various works with which I have been concerned offer interlocking perspectives on this issue. Through the different strategies of representation that they deploy – whether that is examining the views disseminated by institutions and political parties, recording the voices of Muslim men and women, reflecting on the built environment – all the texts seek to examine widely held perceptions of Islam. They all attempt to address the historical basis of certain attitudes concerning Islamic identity and to unravel the emotional complexities that lie behind seemingly straightforward notions of its meaning within the contemporary world.

Above all, writers and commentators like Allievi, Cardini and Fouad Allam aim, by a variety of different means, to dismantle the fearful stereotype of an Islamic other which has developed in the wake of 11 September 2001. In part, as I have endeavoured to show, their works do this by exploring the many different realities that are encompassed by the term Islam and by demonstrating the irrationality of equating radical Islam with Islam itself. Rather than making assertions about the essential characteristics of Islam, their works concentrate on the function of its places of worship in the context of the everyday. Rather than repeating received ideas on the relationship of women to Islam, their works examine assumptions that are habitually made and discuss the differentiated reality that characterizes the Muslim community in Italy. The writings of Yahya Pallavicini, in particular, are intended to demystify the role that religious conviction plays in the lives of Muslim men and women in Italy.

All of the texts that belong to the body of writing to which I have referred are structured, in some sense, as a dialogue. They interrogate perceptions and self perceptions of Italy's Muslim community, but in so doing they reflect on the meaning of Italian identity and indeed on the very nature of such categories as 'us' and 'them'. In his introduction to *Islam italiano*, Allievi makes it

clear that it is no longer possible to speak of Islam *and* the West as though they were two distinct entities; one has, instead, to speak of an Islam that *belongs* to the West, and the whole of his text can be seen, in many ways, as an exploration of the sometimes gradual, but often very rapid, process by which cultures and even religions are influenced, and even altered, by their contact with one another. In his commentary on Pallavicini's text, Marco Politi suggests that one of the most obvious, but nevertheless intriguing, features of the text is that it records *Italian* voices that express an *Italian* experience of contemporary *Italian* life.

If a consciousness of the porosity of the boundaries between self and other is central to the writings that I have discussed, then that consciousness is accentuated by an historical awareness of the extent of the contact, over centuries, between the Islamic world and the West. A greater knowledge of the levels at which cultural exchange occurs is one means of critiquing what Fouad Allam refers to as the Lega Nord's 'invention of tradition' and, more generally, any philosophy that sees identity as an ethnically and socially isolated phenomenon. Cardini, writing in detail on the dangers of living in times of crisis without adequate insight into the complexity of historical processes, does not suggest that a sense of identity is anything other than a necessary part of human existence; his writings, in common with all the others that I have examined, are focussed squarely on the ways in which collective self perceptions interact with one another. Far from advocating a sceptical attitude towards narratives of collective belonging, the argument that is present, with varying degrees of explicitness, in all of his works is that we should attempt to deepen our understanding of how identities function within the public sphere and how they are appropriated by the individual. Yet, if an endeavour of this kind is truly to respond to the intellectual and emotional pressures imposed by globalization, then it should be accompanied by a similarly strong drive to make sense of how the world appears to those who live on the other side of a religious or cultural divide. As he writes in *I cantori della guerra giusta*:

'Bisogna moltiplicare – a cominciare dalle istituzioni, dai posti di lavoro, dalle scuole – le occasioni d'incontro, approfondire le nostre rispettive identità e al tempo stesso studiare e conoscere meglio e più da vicino quelle altrui' (2002: 98) [We must increase – starting with institutions, workplaces, schools – the opportunities for interaction; we must deepen our knowledge of our own identities and, at the same time, study and get to know better, and from closer quarters, those of other people]

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Notes

[1] The main countries of origin of Italy's Muslim population are, in decreasing order, Morocco, Albania, Tunisia, Senegal, Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Algeria, Bosnia, Nigeria and Turkey. For statistical information on the subject see Allievi (2009) and Sbai (2010: 139-140).

[2] See Marco Politi's introduction to Pallavicini (2007: 5-27).

[3] For a discussion of Biffi's views, see Guolo (2007: 87-92). In the view that Biffi put forward (2000), the Church has been guilty of having encouraged a 'politica d'accoglienza' [a welcoming policy] without properly considering the consequences that would flow from such a position. It was his opinion that government policy should encourage migrants, the religious traditions of whose countries of origin would, supposedly, facilitate integration into Italian society.

[4] For an outline of Baget Bozzo's thinking, see 2001 and 2006.

[5] The first part of what is now generally known as her 'trilogy' was initially published in the pages of the *Corriere della Sera* on 29 September 2001. The second text, *La forza della ragione*, which explored the notion of the expansion of the Islamic world through migration, appeared in April 2004. The final part, entitled *Oriana Fallaci intervista Oriana Fallaci*, appeared in September of the same year and was subsequently printed with its postscript, *L'Apocalisse*.

[6] Within two years of its appearance, *La rabbia e l'orgoglio* had sold over one million copies, while the third book in the series sold over half a million copies on the first day of its publication. Details are given by the publisher on the cover of each text.

[7] See, in particular, Tawfik's work *La straniera* [The Foreigner] (2007).

[8] For more biographical details on Sbai, see her page on the website of the Camera dei Deputati, http://www.camera.it/29?shadow_deputato=302884 (accessed 13 May 2012).

[9] Allam teaches sociology at the University of Trieste. He is a regular contributor to the national dailies, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa* and *Il Sole 24 Ore*. He was a member of the Italian parliament, aligned with the Ulivo [The Olive Tree, an alliance of centre-left political parties], from 2006 to 2008.

[10] Guolo teaches sociology at the University of Padua. He has also examined Italian attitudes towards immigration in his work of 2010, *Identità e paura* [Identity and Fear].

[11] Allievi also teaches sociology at the University of Padua.

[12] After having taught medieval history at the Universities of Bari and Florence, Cardini now teaches at the Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane [Italian Institute of Human Sciences]. In addition to his work as a historian and essayist, he is a regular contributor to the Italian daily newspaper affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church, *Avvenire*.

[13] In the words of Marco Politi, the debate over this issue has now become so incandescent that one has lost sight of the essential nature of the question. And that is that the Muslim community, in common with any other religious grouping, has the right to build its own places of worship. This is not a gift for the state to bestow (2007: 23).

[14] As vice-president of the Comunità Religiosa Islamica [Islamic Religious Community] (CO.RE.IS), an association founded in 1997 with the explicit purpose of encouraging inter-religious dialogue, Pallavicini has played an active role in the work of the *Consulta per l'Islam italiano*.

[15] The latter part of the book is made up of sermons delivered by imams from different parts of Italy and a glossary of terms consistent with the work's attempt to explain everyday acts of Islamic worship.

[16] On the modernity of radical Islam, see Gray (2003).

[17] Cardini (2001: 7-10; 2006) is referring to Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

[18] Specifically on this issue, see Allievi (2009: 44-48). On the effect that Fallaci's work has had on the perception of Muslim migrants, see Allievi (2006).

[19] Abd al-Waliyy teaches Islamic law at the University of Naples, he contributes to the work of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, and is the author of *Islam, l'altra civiltà* [Islam: the Other Civilization] (2001). See Pallavicini (2007: 466).

[20] The group behind the initiative was received by the then President, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi on the third anniversary of the attacks against the World Trade Center. The group was made up of both religious and lay representatives of the Muslim community. It included, among others, representatives of the central mosque in

Rome, of the Lega musulmana mondiale in Italia, of the CO.RE.IS, of the Associazione donne marocchine in Italia, of the Giovani musulmani d'Italia, of the imams of the mosques of Salerno and Colle Val d'Elsa. The full list of the members of the *Consulta per l'Islam Italiano* is given on the website of the Ministry of the Interior, http://www1.interno.it (accessed 8 May 2012).

[21] Seven sections are set out: human dignity, rights and duties; social rights – work and health; social rights – schooling, education, information; family – the new generations; secularism and religious freedom; Italy's international commitment. http://www1.interno.it (accessed 8 May 2012).

[22] The Charter refers to the principles of the Constitution of the Italian Republic and to the European Union's guiding principles on human rights. Though the Charter does not have the force of law, the Ministry of the Interior expresses its intention to be guided in all its dealings by the Charter so as to encourage a greater awareness of the issues surrounding immigration and religious freedom. See http://www1.interno.it (accessed 8 May 2012).

[23] She writes: '90% of Muslims are profoundly secular in their way of life, they think above all about their own survival and about guaranteeing the best possible future for their families' (2010: 85).

[24] See, in particular, the section entitled, 'storie ai confini del multiculturalismo' [stories from the borders of multiculturalism] (2010: 152-174).

[25] She cites the example of the Family code promoted by Morocco's Mohammed VI (2010: 57) and the positive changes that it has brought to the life of the country's female population.

[26] In her perception of the potential deficiencies of the idea of multiculturalism, she refers to the work of the American academic, Susan Moller Okin (1999).

[27] The point that he makes specifically on the development of Islamic feminism is, incidentally, one that lies at the very heart of the work of those journalists, most notably Lilli Gruber (2005) and Giuliana Sgrena (2008), who have written extensively on parts of the Islamic world in the aftermath of 9/11.

[28] Allam defines this period as 'an authentic testing ground for female emancipation' (2011: 122-24). He argues that women's emancipation developed in Arab and Islamic countries from the beginning of the twentieth century. In support of this contention, he refers to the texts written respectively in 1900 and 1902 by Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women* and *The New Woman*.

[29] Cardini defines 'we' in the following terms: 'E non abbiamo, noialtri europei cristiani o agnostici e laicisti, semmai la colpa di rimporverar loro di voler mantenere un'identità mentre noi abbiamo dimostrato negli ultimi decenni di tener tanto poco alla nostra?' (2002: 108). [And aren't we, we European Christians, agnostics, lay people, guilty of blaming them for wanting to maintain an identity while we, in the last few decades, have shown very little wish to hold on to our own?]

[30] Guolo expands upon this subject in his text of 2011, *Chi impugna la croce: Lega e Chiesa* [Who holds the cross: the Northern League and the Church].

[31] This point he explores further in his work of 2006 *L'invenzione del nemico* [The Invention of the Enemy].

[32] Literally the place names mean the following in English: Proclaimed Tower, Tower of the Greek, Mount Saracen and Saracen Point.